# TOURISM REEF ADVISORY COMMITTEE COMMUNIQUE

# Meeting 4, 21 and 22 April 2016

*The Tourism Reef Advisory Committee (the committee) was established in 2014 to provide advice to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (the agency) on tourism matters relating to the implementation of the Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report 2014, the Great Barrier Reef Region Strategic Assessment and Program Report and the Reef 2050 Long-term Sustainability Plan. The committee is competency-based with members providing a cross-section of stakeholder expertise and interests in areas relevant to tourism and recreational use of the Great Barrier Reef. The committee is appointed for a three-year period. Ms Glenys Schuntner is independent Chair.*

Ms Glenys Schuntner acknowledged the Great Barrier Reef Traditional Owners and their role as custodians of the Reef; paid respect to the Wulgurukaba and Bindal Traditional Owners, their cultures and their Elders, both past and present; and acknowledged the members representing Traditional Owners groups.

## Great Barrier Reef tourism industry update

**The committee noted the current status of the Great Barrier Reef tourism industry and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park visitation information.**

The Environmental Management Charge (EMC) data showed significant increase in visitation to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park particularly in the Cairns and Whitsundays region.

Members provided an update on tourism from their perspectives. Overall, there has been an increase in tourism numbers across Queensland, particularly in the domestic market. Tourism is seen as the main driver of growth and jobs within Queensland and the industry must harness Government to secure future commitments for infrastructure and skills subsidies. In the next few years, the macro economy is in the industry’s favour with a flatter Australian dollar, decreasing fuel costs, airlines refocusing from fly-in/fly-out mine work to tourism, and less turnover in the tourism workforce.

Northern tourism operators have had a positive season with ideal weather conditions and visitor numbers to the Cairns region still high. The Chinese market remains the biggest market, followed by the domestic market.

The increase in tourism to the Whitsundays region was even more pronounced.

Tourism visitation to the southern Great Barrier Reef has been high with the David Attenborough documentary causing a spike in visitation.

Despite the media reports of the impacts of the coral bleaching event, members were optimistic that most of the Reef will recover but the negative media may potentially impact the tourism industry in the next 12 months. Simple key messaging about the extent of coral bleaching was seen as vital.

## Reef 2050 Long-term Sustainability Plan

**The committee noted the progress on the Reef 2050 Plan Long-term Sustainability Plan (Reef 2050 Plan), the Reef 2050 Plan Integrated Monitoring and Reporting Program, and policies and guidelines relating to the Reef 2050 Plan.**

The Integrated Monitoring and Reporting Program forms a key part of the Reef 2050 Plan and more than ninety existing monitoring and reporting programs have been mapped to the Reef 2050 Plan themes. The Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) and CSIRO are assessing how these programs track the Plan’s performance towards achieving targets and outcomes under each of the Plan’s themes. The agency is also commissioning market research on stakeholder information needs. The committee will be included in this process which will be pivotal to determine how data is reported and products delivered.

Principles have been drafted for the policies on net benefits, cumulative impact management and offsets guidelines for the Great Barrier Reef. A committee working group provided advice on these principles in April 2016. The next step is to finalise case studies and prepare draft documents for public consultation.

## Reef health and responses

**The committee noted the update on coral bleaching occurring in the Great Barrier Reef** **and praised the agency’s focus on its honest and accurate reporting.**

Aerial surveys (indicating the extent of bleaching) and underwater surveys (indicating the severity of bleaching) were used in combination to analyse current reef health status.

The average temperatures for February and March were the hottest on record; with warmer than average temperatures predicted through winter. This could affect disease loads and reproductive abilities of coral. The committee discussed the ways corals could be protected and how bleaching could best be mapped using the Eye on the Reef underwater survey data.

## Eye on the Reef monitoring and crown-of-thorns starfish

**The committee noted the agency’s Eye on the Reef program and approach to managing crown-of-thorns starfish which assists with Reef resilience. The committee stressed the importance for industry and the agency to tell the story of Reef resilience in light of the threats it does face and advised the agency expands its online capability and develops presentations which tell these stories in an engaging way.**

Control of crown-of-thorns starfish (COTS) is a management action that can assist with Reef resilience. It was noted the agency is working on a COTS strategy and contingency plan. Improving water quality will help reduce frequency of outbreaks over time, while targeting culling at key sites can reduce the severity of outbreaks.

The Eye on the Reef database contains more than 15,000 Reef Health and Impact Surveys Reef Health and Impact Surveys (RHIS) and so includes data on coral cover, bleaching and COTS and other impacts like storm damage and diseases. The committee discussed ways the Great Barrier Reef resilience story could be best told.

## Citizens of the Great Barrier Reef

**The committee noted the information on the Citizens of the Great Barrier Reef initiative run by Tourism Tropical North Queensland.**

Tourism Tropical North Queensland provided a briefing on the Citizen of the Great Barrier Reef initiative. It is intended to empower people around the world with the knowledge, experience and ability to protect and enjoy the Reef. It will be a platform to drive change and, once launched, it will use extensive high profile global leadership to recruit global citizens and raise millions in donations for projects.

## Whitsunday capacity study and Reef health

**The committee noted the findings of the Whitsunday Capacity Study prepared for Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators (AMPTO) which raised concerns about overcrowding at some sites and the conclusions from the Reef Health and Impact Surveys undertaken at key locations in the Whitsundays that this use has only negligible impact on coral health. The committee requested all members to encourage their crew to be proactive with visitors so all act responsible when on the Reef.**

AMPTO advised the committee of the outcomes of the Whitsunday Capacity Survey report, for which visitors were interviewed about their perceptions of visitation to popular sites. The Report’s primary recommendation was to establish the environmentally sustainable level of use of each site.

The agency reported on the 52 Reef Health and Impact Assessment Surveys it undertook at the locations where visitors were interviewed (Blue Pearl Bay, Manta Ray Bay, Luncheon Bay and Tongue Bay). The overall finding was a high level of coral cover (20-50 per cent). Not all surveys detected coral damage, where it was detected storm damage was the biggest impact, followed by minor bleaching and low levels of coral damage by animals and snorkelers. The Committee was concerned with images and video footage taken during the surveys which indicated some damage being caused by snorkellers.

## Amending the Whitsundays Plan of Management

**The committee noted the timeframes for the review of the Whitsundays Plan of Management had been extended with public consultation expected in February 2017. The committee supported the agency’s proposed approach to superyacht access and special events. The committee provided detailed advice on the range of options to address congestion and latency concerns.**

The committee was provided an update on the progress of the amendment to the Whitsundays Plan of Management, including details of the current amendment proposals.

The agency’s proposal for increased superyacht access is in relation to vessels less than 70 metres to access up to 38 anchorages. The agency’s position is not to allow the launch of tenders when transiting as large vessels accessing these bays has the potential to displace users; and this activity is not within the intent of the settings.

Special events have been managed within the current plan to date. It is not intended to amend this provision to create additional flexibility, particularly given the challenges in defining ‘special events’ so that the delegate is able to make decisions.

The committee considered a range of options that may address concerns with congestion at some locations and the increased uptake of latent (unused) capacity in permits and whether these should be part of the amendment or addressed through an alternative tool.

## Recreation management

**The committee noted the agency’s approach to managing recreation and advised the agency to review the risk assessment in the Recreation Management Strategy.**

The Recreation Management Strategy focuses on understanding recreational use, working with others, education and public awareness, best practice and in-Park management. The committee proposed that some sections of the risk-based assessment in the Strategy needed to be clarified.

## Tourism management

**The committee advised the agency should focus its tourism expertise on high priority tourism matters such as the amendments to the two Plans of Management; and the Tourism Management Strategy, as less of a priority, could be a concise document showcasing the partnership with industry.**

The Tourism Management Strategy will cover the agency’s tourism partnership programs such as the High Standard Tourism program, Eye on the Reef program, crown-of-thorns control program, Reef Discovery Course and the Reef Guides Program. The Committee saw the development of the Strategy as an opportunity to reflect the upturn in the tourism industry, to address what tourism growth may mean for Reef management and showcase partnerships with industry.

## Pilot Mackay-Whitsunday Reef Recovery Plan

**The committee noted the recent progress in development of the pilot Mackay-Whitsunday Reef Recovery Plan and provided advice on the draft Reef Recovery Plan, including the brochure.**

The committee was briefed on the Pilot Mackay-Whitsunday Reef Recovery Plan, including details of the local consultation. Members commented on the draft brochure which focuses on four cluster areas relating to: coastal ecosystem repair; pest and debris free shorelines and islands; sustainable fishing; and caring for critical marine habitats.

## Improving the permissions system

**The committee:**

* **Noted the consultancies underway to improve the permission system and supported the broad intent of the draft Environmental Impact Management Policy.**
* **Noted the background to the EMC and permissions compliance, endorsed a zero tolerance for non-compliance and requested the fast-tracking of EMC online to create efficiencies for the agency and business.**
* **Strongly encouraged the agency to address the issue of multiple visits to reduce pressure to sensitive locations and does not support the unintended use of Vessel Identifier Numbers (VINs) to increase access.**

The committee considered key aspects of improving the permissions system including: the current review of how facilities are managed, the application of insurance and bonds and a major revision of the environmental impact management policy which is due for public consultation in late 2016. The Committee reviewed the non-compliance figures relating to permissions and EMC. The Committee raised concerns that allowing multiple visits to a location on any one day could increase pressure at some locations.

## Coral Sea Commonwealth Marine Reserve update

**The committee noted the update on the Commonwealth Marine Reserve and expressed a desire to be involved in the planning process, including engagement with operators on issues out of session.**

The Coral Sea Commonwealth Marine Reserve is part of a nation-wide network of marine reserves, managed by Parks Australia, Commonwealth Department of the Environment. Claims that the Coral Sea is being closed to all users are not true. It is a proclaimed reserve and the next step is to develop a management plan through a consultation process. There are 105 current authorisations issued for uses in the Coral Sea (filming, tourism, researchers etc.). There is consideration on whether to certify tourism operators and how to manage moorings on Osprey Reef.

## Field Management program

**The committee noted the Field Management Program’s Annual Report Summary, five-year Business Strategy and draft Annual Business Plan. A working group was set up to assist out-of-session with the five-year periodic review, especially the tourism infrastructure component, and to advise on improvements to recreational fishing compliance. The Committee advocated for future funding for the Field Management Program to continue its good work.**

The committee was briefed on the work of the Field Management Program and invited to provide comment on the draft Annual Business Plan 2016–17.

Under the intergovernmental agreement, there is also a five year periodic review of the Program due at the end of this year. Preliminary work has highlighted program gaps and potential solutions to be considered in the review. They include a second vessel; improving island biosecurity and adaptive management; improving vessel monitoring and compliance; empowering Traditional Owners; improving tourism infrastructure; and improving base funding.

The Committee was also briefed on the approach to managing recreational fishing compliance. A working group was established to assist on these matters with advice out of session.

## Tourism Reef Advisory Committee Membership

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| **Member** | **Expertise/Affiliation** |
| Ms Glenys Schuntner | INDEPENDENT CHAIR- Advocacy for regional economic development |
| Mr Tony Baker | Marine tourism operations, including pontoons, in the northern region of the Great Barrier Reef |
| Mr Tony Brown | Sailing and day tourism operations in the central region of the Great Barrier Reef |
| Mr Tony Charters | Ecotourism and tourism in protected areas  *Ecotourism Australia* |
| Mr Mike Drake | International cruise shipping and marketing |
| Mr Peter Gash | Sustainable tourism and aircraft operations in the southern region of the Great Barrier Reef |
| Ms Chrissy Grant | Indigenous affairs |
| Mr Daniel Gschwind | Business acumen and economics  *Queensland Tourism Industry Council* |
| TBA | Tourism resorts |
| Ms Annie Judd | Bareboat operations in the Whitsundays and tourism marketing |
| Mr Geoff Kent | Tourism management in the Great Barrier Reef Coast Marine Park  *National Parks, Recreation, Sports and Racing (Queensland)* |
| Mr Daniel McCarthy | Charter fishing |
| Mr Col McKenzie | Marine tourism industry and diving  *Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators* |
| Mr David Morgans | Regional tourism development  *Tourism and Events Queensland* |
| Ms Bianca Priest | Commonwealth Marine Reserves  *Parks Australia (Australian Government)* |
| Ms Margaret Johnson | GBRMPA General Manager, Strategic Policy and Reef Stewardship |
| Dr Roger Beeden | GBRMPA Director, Tourism and Stewardship |